

# Academics line up to boycott world's biggest journal publisher

February 15 2012

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Academics say they are tired of the extortionate practices of Elsevier, a giant of journal publishing. Flickr/diylibrarian

Dozens of Australian academics have joined a growing boycott of Elsevier, one of the world's leading publishers of academic journals, over the behemoth's "extortionate efforts to extract money" from people who wish to access their taxpayer-funded research.

At least 97 academics from across the country have signed their names to a boycott of the publisher, which owns more than 2,000 titles. In

2010, the company made a profit of £724m on revenues of £2bn, for an operating profit margin of 36%.

So far [almost 6,000 researchers](#) across the world have pledged to withdraw the fruits of their research from Elsevier journals.

Academics are typically required to pay journals an “article processing fee” to cover the cost of the peer-review and editing process. They must also sign over the copyright to the published work.

For their part, journals then charge up to \$A42 per piece for access to the work online. Libraries that subscribe to one journal usually have to pay vastly inflated amounts for bundled services, said Dr Danny Kingsley, the Australian National University’s manager of scholarly communications and e-publishing. Dr Kingsley also coordinates the university’s new Digital Collections database, a free online repository of academic research.

“The problem in Australia is that the research councils – the Australian Research Council and the National Health and Medical Research Council – award funding to academics who publish their work in the journals that are judged under a metrics system to have the most impact,” Dr Kingsley said.

“So if academics boycott those journals, it could really hurt their careers. It’s easier to give in to their extortionate efforts to extract money than to join a boycott.”

Academics are also furious that Elsevier has placed its weight behind a bill in the US – the Research Works Act – that aims to make it illegal to force researchers to make their work publicly available.

Dr Alicia Wise, Elsevier’s director of universal access, was not available

to comment today. But last week she defended the publisher by saying that “over the past 10 years, our prices have been in the lowest quartile in the publishing industry.

“Last year our prices were lower than our competitors'. I'm not sure why we are the focus of this boycott, but I'm very concerned about one dissatisfied scientist, and I'm concerned about 2,000.”

The big publishers say that their contribution, from peer review through to distribution and database maintenance, is costly – but adds value, which can be seen in the published article and the benefit it brings for the author.

Dr Gavin Moodie, the principal policy advisor at RMIT University, signed his name to the boycott to register his indignation at Elsevier's attempts to keep information out of the public domain: “Elsevier is like the other big journals publishers in increasing its already high subscription prices and bundling journal subscriptions.

“I decided to get behind this protest because Elsevier also supports the US's misleadingly titled Stop Online Piracy Act which would authorise the closure of whole sites which host a few copied works and the PROTECT IP Act which would close down web sites used incidentally to copy copyright works.”

Even worse, he said, was Elsevier's support for the US Research Works Act, which would prohibit open access requirements for federally funded research, thus stopping or greatly curtailing digital research repositories open to the public.

“Of course other big copyright owners such as News Corporation support these attempts to roll back the online tide to protect their business founded on analogue principles, but in this case I think an

effective tactic might be to start with a big copyright owner such as Elsevier which depends on scholars' goodwill to make its very big profits.

“By removing that goodwill I hope that Elsevier might change its ways and be an example to other big journals publishers and copyright owners.”

Dr Michael Young, a visiting fellow in the Department of Anthropology at the Australian National University, joined the protest after receiving a request from Elsevier to revise a 4,000-word paper for its International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences. Elsevier said it could not pay him more than its standard fee: \$US100.

“What hack would spend a month or two researching and polishing an encyclopedia essay for such an insulting pittance?” he said. “And forget the academic kudos, for the ANU awards no points for such articles. In the light of ... revelations about this company’s level of profits I’m seriously angry at the level of exploitation of academics.”

In some countries, government agencies have begun to mandate that articles produced by the researchers they fund be available free of charge within 12 months of publication.

In Australia, however, the Australian Research Council has introduced rules that merely “encourage” academics to add their work to open access databases. The other major funding body, the National Health and Medical Research Council, is planning to go further. It will amend its rules later this year to mandate that the scholarly work it helps to fund be made freely available.

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## Source: The Conversation

Citation: Academics line up to boycott world's biggest journal publisher (2012, February 15)  
retrieved 19 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2012-02-academics-line-boycott-world-biggest.html>

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